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ABSTRACT

This study tests the hypothesis that culturally disadvantaged (CD) children would return more often to a completed task (one on which they had had previous success), while non-culturally disadvantaged (NCD) children would return more often to an incompleted task (to achieve closure or to re-try a task which they had previously failed.) Failure avoidance would be shown in CD children because of expectancy for and tolerance of failure in response to early environmental conditions which lack achievement motivation, with the opposite true of NCD children. Subjects were 24 NCD and 20 CD first graders. The NCD children were enrolled in a private school attended by upper middle class children, and the CD children were enrolled in a public school attended by lower class children. Each group included two Negro children. Each subject was individually given two puzzles to assemble within certain time limits. Failure was experimentally induced on one puzzle experience because the experimenter announced the time was up before puzzle completion, but success was allowed on the other puzzle experience because as much time was given as was needed for completion. After an interim period, the subject was asked which puzzle he would like to make again. An analysis of the repetition choice data upheld the original hypothesis and concomitant statement. (NH)

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FAILURE AVOIDANCE IN CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED AND NON-CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED FIRST GRADE CHILDREN[1]

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The problem of decreased achievement motivation in culturally disadvantaged children has received increasing attention over the past several years. Poor school performance in the culturally disadvantaged (CD) child relative to the non-culturally disadvantaged (NCD) child has been attributed, at least in part, to this apparently motivational factor, or to what many have observed to

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[1] An EIP Special Study Abstract, Education Improvement Program Durham, North Carolina, 1966.

be failure avoidance as opposed to success striving behavior. Bialer (1960), Bialer and Cromwell (1959), and others have reported on failure avoidance in the mentally retarded as a motivational factor correlated with mental age and developmentally acquired in maternal/child or adult/child interaction. It has not been extensively evaluated in a culturally disadvantaged population.

The construct of failure avoidance has been contrasted with a basic perceptual-personality phenomenon characterized within Field theory as "innate" to the human. This phenomenon is described in the psychological literature as the Zeigarnik effect or the tendency toward closure or task completion in the operations of human behavior (Eysenck, 1960). The interchangeability of the constructs of low motivation, failure avoidance and attributes of the Zeigarnik effect are tenuous. However, there is potential value in focusing upon their relationship in studies of human motivation.

This study introduced the notion of equating the inability to successfully complete a task, and consequent lack of closure, with failure. This equation has been employed in the past with some degree of success in highlighting factors in perceptual and cognitive development (Bialer, 1960). Conversely, the successful completion of a task, or the achievment of closure, implies success. Since these notions are equated with motivational states, high achievement motivation would

imply success striving or a drive toward closure, while low achievement motivation would imply failure avoidance and tolerance of lack of closure.

In our present study, this sequence of notions is utilized in a comparative test between reportedly low achievement motivated and high achievement motivated children. The former, in this case, are CD children, the latter NCD children. These notions, and the literature, (Rosenzweig, 1933 and 1945) lead us to predict that the low achievement motivated (CD) children would be failure avoidant and lack-of-closure tolerant, while the high achievement motivated (NCD) children would be success and closure striving. Simply stated in relation to the present study task, CD children should more often return to the completed task (one on which previously they have been successful) while NCD children should more often return to an 'incompleted task (to achieve closure or to re-try an 'incompleted task in which they have previously failed). By registering such behavior, it would seem that the motivational state of children could be demonstrated, and a measure of motivational state established, by repetition choice behavior in the face of a decision to repeat one of two tasks previously attempted, one of which has failed. Failure avoidance would be demonstrated in CD children because of expectancy for and tolerance of failure in response to early environmental conditions lacking achievement motivating influence. Success striving will be demonstrated in NCD children because of early influence to achieve and eradicate failure.

METHOD

Subjects:

Subjects (S^S) were 24 NCD (10 boys, 14 girls) and 20 CD (9 boys, 11 girls) first grade children. NCD children ranged in age from 5 years 2 months to 6 years 8 mon ths, while CD children ranged in age from 6 years 1 month to 7 years 3 months. NCD children attended a private school attended by upper middle socio-economic class children, while CD children attended public school in a low-income city area attended by lower socio-economic children. Each group included two Negro children.

Materials

The materials used in the study consisted of two plastic puzzles, a lion and a monkey. The former was a 14 piece puzzle, the latter was a 15 piece puzzle (see Figures 1 and 2).* Each was made up of the same colors and was presumed to be of equal difficulty and interest value. Pieces were magnitized to fit into a metal frame measuring 10" x 12" on the outside.

Procedure

The Examiner (E) visited each group of S^S during the school day and selected S^S one at a time to accompany E to a private room for testing. S was seated at a small table opposite E in typical testing fashion. On the table, facing S, were placed the two intact puzzles. E then said:

* Figures 1 and 2, pictures of puzzles, No. 906-Lion and No. 910-Monkey, are copyrighted by Child Guidance Toys, Inc. and are not available for reproduction at this time.

"Here are two puzzles that I want you to put together as fast as you can. I am going to time you with this watch and give you a certain amount of time to finish each one. (E shows S watch). If you do not finish in time, I will have to stop you. When I say, 'Go', start on the first puzzle. (E points to puzzle S is to do first). Do it as quickly as you can! Do you understand?"

After these instructions, E disassembled both puzzles, leaving the pieces in the proper areas in two piles. S was then told to begin ("Go") by assembling the puzzle to which E pointed first. The order of initiation by S was counter-balanced across S^S for left/right placement of lion-versus-monkey puzzle in order to control for systematic position preference by S^S in the repetition phase of the task.

E experimentally induced failure by S on one of the puzzles by interrupting and stopping S prior to the insertion of the sixth piece by saying, "Time's up." Success was allowed on the other puzzle regardless of the time required to complete it. Interruption/completion orders were alternated across S^S to equate success and failure experiences with the two puzzles.

After both puzzle experiences, puzzles were withdrawn and an interim period of from five to ten minutes was spent by S drawing a picture of anything he wished. When the drawing was finished S was asked to describe his picture and a short conversation ensued between E and S.

Next, both puzzles were replaced, intact, before S in the same locations previously observed by S. S was then asked to choose which puzzle he would like

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to work again. S's repetition choice (RC) was noted and he was asked the reason for his choice. Reasons were noted and S was returned to the classroom without further testing.

Data Analysis

RC data were tabulated and CD/NCD behavior was compared to test the predictions stated. The Sign test for independent samples was employed to test differences between groups. Confidence levels were set up at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Results (Table 1.) indicated that 17 of the 20 CD children returned to the previously completed task (successful task). In the NCD group, 13 of the

		RC		
		Incomplete	Complete	
GROUP	NCD	13	11	24
	CD	3	17	20
		16	28	N=44

REPETITION CHOICES OF CD AND NCD CHILDREN

Table 1.

24 children returned to the interrupted (failed) task. As predicted, the CD group returned significantly more often ($p < .05$) to the completed (successful) task. There was no significant difference between RC^S for NCD children.

CD children returned significantly more often to the completed task ($p < .05$) than did the NCD children and NCD children returned more often ($p < .01$) to the incompleted task than did CD children.

There was a slight but non-significant tendency in each group to return to the monkey puzzle in preference to the lion puzzle. There were no significant differences in RC within either group or within both groups combined with respect to sex of S^S.

Data from children's drawings and reasons for RC were not analyzed or interpreted.

SUMMARY

Twenty-four non-culturally disadvantaged (NCD) and twenty culturally disadvantaged (CD) first grade children were given two puzzles to assemble under stress of time limit. S^S were allowed to complete one puzzle successfully, while failure was induced in the other by calling time before completion. After an interim period each S was asked to choose which of the puzzles he would like to repeat (RC).

As predicted, the CD children's RC^S were significantly directed toward previously successful puzzles ($p < .05$) demonstrating failure avoidance or low achievement motivation. NCD children did not select between incompleted and completed puzzles above chance level but chose the incompleted task significantly more often ($p < .01$) and completed puzzles significantly less often ($p < .05$) than CD children. This was interpreted as upholding predicted success striving of NCD versus CD children.

Data were considered to have upheld hypotheses generated concerning higher states of achievement motivation in NCD as compared to CD children. The capability of measurement of this state through repetition choice (RC) was implied.

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